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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses the kinds of programs online user groups (OUGs) provide to aid their members in keeping abreast of the new technology and new information in the online world. Four methods of program planning are discussed: (1) alternation of general topics and subject specific programs; (2) longer meeting programs with several tracks a searcher can follow; (3) meetings in cooperation with other professional organizations; and (4) programs geared to inform non-searchers about the online information world. (RAA)

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REACHING OUT -- COOPERATIVE AND SOLO OUG VENTURES

by

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Reaching Out - Cooperative and Solo OUG Ventures

Just how do Online User Groups provide contingency education in order to cope with all the new and updated information, training, hardware changes, cost and pricing issues, new databases - in total, the entire rapidly escalating online world? Well cope they do indeed and in a vast variety of ways. But rather than simply list the titles of programs held by user groups I would like to briefly explore and outline how online user groups manage to aid their members in being proficient and up-to-date searchers.

Since every online user group was formed with this goal in mind. Prior to the inception of the concept "Online User Group" the task of informing searchers of new online trends and ideas had been left to other library and information science organizations. But because many of these groups were primarily designed for other purposes, online issues were often relegated a back seat. Those organizations that did offer some online emphasis were often ill-equipped to satisfy the growing need for hardcore online learning and education. Online User Groups are characterized by the intense desire of its members to learn, to keep abreast of the new technology, the new information. Online User Groups have programs that inform searchers on topics they can use in their everyday work - these groups are definitely practicality oriented.

Anyone who has ever been on a program planning committee for an online user group doubtless has seen this scenario: Everyone is sitting around a table - iced tea and a nice breeze for us southerners, hot cocoa and a space heater for those we in Texas affectionately called "them Yankees".

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Placed before you are the statistics resulting from the recent member survey, this survey giving you a membership analysis.

A sampling shows you have 15% of the membership devoted to searching the medical literature; 5% interested in the social sciences; 10% are novice searchers while 55% have been searching more than 3 years. The list goes on. The planning committee begins to toss out ideas (vendor demos, database explanations, telecommunications) for the programs needed to satisfy the many member needs well, invariably the list far exceeds the number of meetings originally planned per year. There is thus a need for selection, and a method for providing these needed programs.

Selection is most logically done by first categorizing the possible programs in terms of (1) general programs and (2) subject specific programs, then inturn these can be "prioritized" by the member needs. There are several methods of presenting these types of programs, the four main ideas are outlined herein.

One method involves alternating subject - specific programs such as environmental databases, chemical databases with general interest programs such as hardware selection cost effective searching. This means that a group meeting say, once a month would alternate programs, so that <u>every other</u> program would be of interest to the majority of the groups members, with the other programs being tailored to the specific needs of various special interest fractions in the group. Thus the program planning committee is trying to please all of its members only some of the time, and it definitely expects a better attendence for the general meetings than the specific ones.

A second method employed by user groups is to hold a longer meeting, say of a day or two, and offer various directions a searcher can follow, much as is seen in this very session. A general session, followed by subject specific meetings held coincidentally can be quite useful in that it is often easier for a librarian to set aside 2 days every 3 or 4 months for continuing education purposes than it is to try and go to one meeting a month. There is a problem when two sessions useful to a searcher are held at the same time, but a high incidence of this can be avoided by careful scheduling on the part of the program committee. The two methods just described are similar and perhaps the decision of which is best can be told by a member survey and experience itself.

A third method being explored by more and more user groups is to join forces with other professional associations to present programs. Both library and information science organizations as well as other groups are viable coops. As very few online user groups are officially affiliated with another professional organization this permits great flexibility. An online group can schedule workshops and programs to be held in the same time frame, as say, regional library meetings. Thus many people can benefit from the programm by being able to justify time and travel expenses more easily. Programs that are of the interest and needs of both searchers and non-searchers can be scheduled by both organizations, and with the many headaches and work involved in planning such programs shared. Another advantage in piggy-backing with other organizations is the sharing of newsletters, and publications. It is important to remember that the realm of these other organizations is not limited to information groups above. Indeed there are many online searchers in organizations such as the American Chemical Society, or the College of American Cardiologists that might welcome programs that are subject-oriented.

These groups are also a good forum for a fourth type (often neglected) of program - those presented by the user groups to non-searchers. These programs are educational & informative and an aid in elevating the general individuals awareness of the many online resources available and their usefulness.

This last decade has been a period of escalating innovations in the online world. The programs held by user groups illustrate this rapid growth: Terminal Fairs are being held yearly to keep searchers up to date with hardware technology; database producers are now going directly to the user groups to explain their product more thoroughly; the major vendors have offices throughout the country bringing more current awareness programs about their constant efforts to improve their systems; programs are geared to saving time, saving money, saving searchers!

It would be difficult to say which method outlined is best for any one user group - a survey of the various groups and their programs showed no consistent factors that indicate which method is best to use. I would suggest new user groups experiment with them all and get feedback from the members. Established user groups might try and revamp their systems once in a while if membership seems to slow down a bit.

To recapitulate, the four methods of program planning are:

1. Alternation of general topics and subject specific programs.
2. Longer meeting programs with several tracks a searcher can follow.
3. Meetings in cooperation with other professional organizations.
4. Programs geared to inform non-searchers about the online information world.

The Online User Forum column in Online Review will now be including the news of online user groups, and can be a source of ideas for programs. One final suggestion. Be sure your group is included in the Online Circuit's directory, as published by Marjorie Hlava for the National Online Circuit. Many people offering programs to groups use this directory in contacting the Online User Group. Best of luck in your ventures . . . be they solo or cooperative.